

# How to Avoid Aggressive

Photos courtesy of AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

**M**ore and more drivers are acting out their anger when they get behind the wheel of a car. After being cut off, tailgated or slowed down by another vehicle, these angry drivers commit incredible acts of violence—including assault and murder.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety studied more than 10,000 incidents of violent, aggressive driving committed between 1990 and 1996. That study showed at least 218 people were killed, and another 12,610 were injured when drivers got angry.

Although many drivers involved in these incidents were men between the ages of 18 and 26, people of all ages can become aggressive drivers. All it takes is for a person to be in a bad mood, or for the wrong set of circumstances to be present. What's more, when drivers explain why they became violent, the reasons often are incredibly trivial: "He wouldn't let me pass," or "she kept tailgating me" are typical examples. One driver accused of murder said, "He practically ran me off the road—what was I supposed to do?"

How can you avoid becoming the victim of an aggressive driver? While there are no sure techniques, these three basic principles can help:



Drivers get angry when people follow them too closely.

## Don't Offend

Surveys show remarkably consistent results when drivers were asked what angers them most. A few specific behaviors seem unusually likely to enrage other drivers:

**Cutting them off.** When you merge, make sure you have plenty of room. Use your turn signal to show your intentions before making a move. If you make a mistake and accidentally cut off someone, try to apologize with an appropriate gesture. When other people cut you off, slow down and give them room to merge into your lane.

# Driving

If you see another driver acting angry, avoid eye contact.

**Driving slowly in the left lane.** When you're in the left lane and people want to pass, move over and let them by. You may be "in the right" because you're traveling the speed limit, but you also may be putting yourself at risk by making drivers behind you angry. The law in many states and provinces requires you to travel in the right lane and use the far-left lane only for passing. Besides, it's simple courtesy to move over and let others by.

**Tailgating.** Drivers get angry when people follow them too closely. Allow at least a two-second space between your car and the one ahead (e.g., when you see the car ahead pass a fixed point, you should be able to count at least "one thousand, two thousand" before you pass the same point). If you think another car is driving too slowly but you can't pass, pull back and allow more space—not less. Always leave room to get out of the way if something unexpected happens. You should be able to see the headlights of the car behind you in your rearview mirror. If you feel another car is following too closely, signal and pull over to let the other driver go by.

**Gestures.** Almost nothing makes another driver angrier than an obscene gesture. Keep your hands on the wheel and avoid making any gestures that might anger another driver, even "harmless" expressions of irritation like shaking your head. Be a cautious and courteous driver. Signal every time you merge or change lanes and whenever you turn. Sparingly—if ever—use your horn. If you and another driver see a parking space at the same time, let the



other person have it. And, if another driver seems eager to get in front of you, say, "Be my guest." When you respond this way for a while, "be my guest" becomes your automatic response, and you won't be as offended by other drivers' rudeness.

## Don't Engage

One angry driver can't start a fight unless another driver is willing to join in. You can protect yourself against aggressive drivers by refusing to become angry at them. Orator Robert Ingersoll said, "Anger blows out the lamp of the mind." An angry person can do things they later may regret—and that includes you.

If you're tempted to retaliate against another driver, stop and think, "Would I want to fly in an airplane with a pilot acting this way?" Think about the consequences your angry actions could cause; then cool down and continue your trip.

**Steer clear.** Give angry drivers lots of room. A driver you may have offended can snap and become dangerous. When other drivers try to pick a fight, put as much distance as possible between you and them. Never pull off to the side of the road and try to settle things “man to man.”

**Avoid eye contact.** If another driver is acting angry with you, don’t make eye contact. Looking or staring at another driver can turn an impersonal encounter between two vehicles into a personal duel. Once things get personal, the situation can get out of hand fast.

**Get help.** If you believe the other driver is following you or is trying to start a fight, get help. If you have a cellular phone, call the police. Otherwise, drive to a place with other people around, such as a police station, convenience store, shopping center, or a hospital. Use your horn to get someone’s attention, which usually discourages an aggressor. Do not get out of your car, and do not go home.

## Adjust Your Attitude

The most important actions you can take to avoid aggressive driving take place inside your head. By changing your approach to driving, you can make every trip more pleasant. Try these ideas for a pleasant change:



One person staying calm during a minor traffic mishap often can diffuse the situation.

**Forget winning.** For too many motorists, driving becomes a contest. Are you one of those drivers who allow the shortest possible time for a trip and then race the clock? If something happens to slow you down, do you get angry? The solution: Allow more time for your trip. You’ll be amazed how much more relaxed you feel when you have a few extra minutes. Instead of trying to “make good time,” try to “make time good.” Listen to soothing music or a book on tape. Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing. You’ll arrive much calmer, fresher and in a less stressed-out frame of mind.

**Put yourself in the other driver’s shoes.** Instead of judging the other driver, try to imagine why he or she is driving that way. Someone speeding and constantly changing lanes may be a volunteer fireman or a physician. Someone who jerks from one lane to another may have a bee in the car or a crying baby in the back seat. Whatever the reason, it has nothing to do with you. Stay cool and don’t take other drivers’ actions personally.

**If you think you have a problem, ask for help.** Courses in anger management have been shown to reduce heart attacks. These same techniques can help angry drivers. Dramatic changes in attitude and behavior have been recorded among drivers who successfully reinvented their approach to the road. Look for anger-management courses in your area. Self-help books on stress reduction and anger management also can be helpful.

Violent, aggressive driving clearly is on the rise, but you can avoid becoming a victim. Follow these suggestions, and you may find that driving becomes a new, more enjoyable experience. **A**

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